



You don't have to sit at your computer or TV screen to enjoy the thrills of modern gaming. Jon Corke explains how to get the most from playing games on the move

If you emptied your pockets right now, chances are one of them would contain a mobile phone. Packed into that tiny handset is more power than you would have found in a computer from the early 1990s. This, coupled with its colour screen and memory capability, makes a mobile phone the ideal gaming device. Mobiles can run increasingly advanced games, including faithful versions of console favourites and new 3D titles, so gamers can get their fix wherever they may be.

There are hundreds of titles to download and a huge range of game types from which to choose, including arcade classics, platform adventures and sport simulations. This is one gaming hobby that won't prove expensive, either. Many games cost less than £5 each, and provide a good few hours of entertainment.

In this article, we'll explain everything you need to know about playing games on your phone, from the sorts of features you should look for on a handset to the services offered by mobile phone networks.

WHAT YOU NEED

Before you can get started, you must have a game-friendly handset. Every mobile phone worth its salt is capable of playing games, but some models are better equipped than others. To make the most of the experience, there are five key features you should look for in a mobile

phone: usability, processor, screen, memory and battery life.

USABILITY

It is important to consider the way a handset feels in your hand. It must be comfortable to hold and have large, well-spaced, responsive buttons for when your thumbs are feverishly tapping away. In particular, you should avoid anything with an unconventional keypad or a wacky design, as these products will be difficult to play games on.

PROCESSOR

If you're into fast-paced games such as motor racing or shoot-'em-ups, you'll need a device with a decent processor that can handle speedy gameplay, because it will need to render screens quickly. It can be difficult to check this yourself, so let the professionals do it for you. The experts at <http://jbenchmark.com> rate every handset for its graphical performance speed. The website also compares the ratings of handsets for both 3D and 2D graphics.

SCREEN

Game developers put a lot of time and effort into producing smooth and colourful graphics, so if you want to appreciate the fruits of their labour you need a high-quality colour display. A screen with a resolution of 240x320 pixels that can

display 262,000 colours is standard and should do the trick. Touch-screen handsets are becoming more common, but only a limited number of games are available for this format.

MEMORY

A mobile game doesn't take up much storage space, although it could be anything from 50KB to 500KB. However, if you're planning to start a small collection, the capacity of your phone could be an issue. Pick a handset with a decent amount of onboard memory and, preferably, a memory card slot for further expansion.

BATTERY LIFE

The length of time you'll spend playing games will affect the amount of power used. The longer you play, the bigger the drain on the phone's battery. When choosing a new phone for mobile gaming, you should pay closer attention to the battery life than you would otherwise. Better still, buy a second battery to carry around with you in case of emergencies. You wouldn't want to run out of power at a crucial moment.

THE RIGHT HANDSET

The ideal gaming mobile phone has controls that are comfortable to use, a decent screen, a fast processor, lots of memory and good battery life. You might think manufacturers would be



rushing to release products with these features. Nokia made a stab at doing this in 2004, when it produced the N-Gage QD, a revolutionary gaming mobile phone that ticked all the right boxes. In fact, this product was arguably more handheld console than mobile phone. It was designed to be held horizontally in two hands with the controls either side of the central screen, for the ultimate in gameplay. Games were supplied on memory cards and, as such, were more advanced and longer-lasting than standard mobile games. Sadly, while die-hard gamers appreciated the QD, it achieved limited commercial success.

A combination of Nokia altering its strategy and technological developments in smartphone devices has led to a change of focus for the N-Gage brand. It is now a gaming platform – an alternative to Java – rather than a handheld device. The new service will be installed as an application on certain new Nokia smartphones and will be available as a free download to others. As a result, N-Gage games can be played on many of the latest Nokia smartphones, and they have better graphics and more immersive gameplay than standard Java games.

The best of the new devices with the N-Gage application preinstalled is Nokia's N81 8GB, which is £300 sim-free from www.lectronics.co.uk and free on contract with O₂. This is a 3G multimedia smartphone with WiFi and 8GB of internal memory. It also has stereo Bluetooth, which allows music to be streamed from the mobile phone to compatible wireless headphones, so you can listen in stereo, rather than just one ear, as is the case with a standard mono Bluetooth headset.

The N81 8GB is tailor-made for mobile gaming thanks to its excellent, high-resolution colour screen, dedicated gaming buttons and ability to play games in landscape mode, utilising the whole of the screen. These features make it easily the best handset for gaming. There's also a standard version available, the N81, which has a microSD card slot instead of the 8GB of memory.

Following closely behind is Sony Ericsson's W550i, another model fashioned for the discerning mobile gamer. This swivelling Walkman phone supports landscape screen orientation, as well as portrait mode. While the screen isn't crisp, the handset blasts out excellent sound and has good all-round performance. The W550i has been around for a while, but you can still buy it online for around £130 on prepay.

Other excellent gaming handsets are Nokia's N95 (which also has an 8GB version available) and Sony Ericsson's K810i. Both are widely available for free on a contract.

FINDING YOUR DOWNLOADS

When downloading your games, think about the model of phone you have, and which games will be suitable. For example, if you own a basic mobile then puzzle and strategy games are the most suitable. These types of games don't pack in the action and therefore don't require a lot of processing and graphics power.

If you've got a super-charged smartphone, you can safely go for something more fast-paced, such as a racing or shoot-'em-up title. Action games will run on almost all mobiles, but the experience will be more enjoyable on high-end models.

The quickest and easiest way to get hold of games is to access your operator's portal (see our 'How to' walkthrough on page 144). Each of the five main UK networks has a wide selection of games, which are regularly updated and can be accessed directly from your phone. The different services on offer are presented below.

O₂ ACTIVE

The Games Arcade on O₂ Active has a vast number of titles from all the top manufacturers, under the categories of Action, Arcade N Retro, Puzzle N Strategy, Sport, TV N Film and Lifestyle. There's also a regularly updated New Releases section and a variety of suggested titles under O₂ Recommends. Prices range from £1 to £5, with half-price offers in the Megasale section and single puzzles available for 50p. When you click on each title in the list, you will see a screenshot, the full price and a brief description of the game.

A handy personal section entitled My Games allows you to keep tabs on recent purchases. This section lets you download games again for free within 24 hours. This is handy if there is a problem with the download or if you accidentally delete the game from your handset.

ORANGE WORLD

Games are located under the Fun section of Orange World on a good-looking and easy-to-use page. The game of the month is listed first, followed by the latest arrivals and the top 10 games. There are hundreds of games available, with prices ranging from £3 to £5. Thrifty souls should keep an eye out for the regular sale



◀ The Nokia N95's 8GB of memory and great screen make it ideal for playing games

offers. Keen gamers can even discuss their favourite titles with other users and post top scores on a games message board.

Orange also has an excellent download service under the games section at www.orangedownloads.co.uk, where users of any UK network can check handset compatibility and download a huge selection of games. After entering your network and handset details you can browse a range of compatible games, each listed with a unique code. Text this code to the listed SMS number to download games.

PLANET 3

To find games on a 3 Network handset, access Planet 3's site on your phone's mobile browser by hitting the keypad button with the 3 logo. Select Go to Services and Games. You can also text GAMES to 34263 for an SMS link to the games store.

There's a good selection of games available, in categories such as Puzzle, Retro-Classic, Action, Sport and Strategy. The site is updated weekly and has some good deals, including 99p games and regular half-price offers. You can try certain games before you buy, and there's the option to receive free weekly SMS alerts on gaming news. Text ALERT to 34263 to subscribe.

T-ZONES

T-Mobile has a massive range of titles in the games section of t-zones, with a description and two or three screenshots supplied for each one. Like O₂ it provides a list of recommended titles

Close encounters of the third kind 3D gaming

Today's gamers are used to seeing detailed graphics and seamless gameplay on their PlayStations and Xboxes. They now expect the same gaming experience on a mobile phone. To meet this demand, developers have introduced the Mobile 3D Graphics (M3G) standard, enabling them to produce high-quality 3D games on a limited size screen and at low power consumption.

M3G is a specification that defines the way 3D computer games are created for the mobile phone and is an extension of the Java platform. Advanced technology such as increased processor speed, 3D hardware accelerators and dedicated graphics chips enable handsets to process the graphics quickly and smoothly, offering high frame rates, smooth gameplay and a rich user experience.

One of the first 3D mobile games was Doom, a port of the original first-person shooter that was so

popular in its PC format. However, this is a basic title, and although the action is represented in true 3D it is turn-based so the user simply types in text commands for the character to act.

More recently, the genre has improved considerably with the excellent Orcs & Elves. This is more action-based, and you actually slash and fight your way through enemies in real time. Elsewhere, there is a multitude of 3D titles available. Top picks include the racing game V Rally 3D and the football simulation Pro Evolution Soccer 2008.



▲ V Rally offers a 3D racing experience

GETTING SMART

3D gaming capabilities will almost certainly be a feature on advanced smartphones such as the Nokia Nseries and other Symbian Series 60 models, where the more powerful processors can handle accelerated gameplay with ease. 3D also appears on many other high-end handsets on the market. Top picks are the Sony Ericsson W910i and K810i, the Samsung G600 and the Motorola RIZR Z8.



and adds at least four new games every week. Games range from £3 to £5, with regular special offers, two-for-one deals and 50p single puzzles.

If you're unsure about which title to choose or you feel £5 is a bit steep, T-Mobile also has a games rental facility. As part of its free Clubzone service, you can rent a game for one or two days, paying £1 or £2 rather than buying it outright. Members also receive regular updates on the latest games, special member-only offers and the chance to enter exclusive competitions.

VODAFONE LIVE!

Games are located under the Fun and Info section of the busy Vodafone live! portal, listed in a range of categories including Top Games, What's New and Casual Games. Titles of the week are promoted at the head of the page, with a direct link to the game description, screenshots and the parental guidance rating. Prices range from £3 to £5, with some half-price offers, and you can sign up for free MMS alerts on the latest releases. Users of Vodafone Mobile Internet handsets will find the same games on the homepage under Music and Fun.

OTHER GAME SITES

The network portals aren't the only place to download games. In many cases, you can buy directly from the game developer's own website. For example, Glu provides exactly this service at www.glumobile.com, where its entire portfolio of titles is listed. You can even try out demo versions of games online before buying. On sending a text message containing the relevant

shortcode for a particular game, you will receive a text with a WAP link to download the file and the cost will be charged to your phone bill. Other developers, including Gameloft (www.gameloft.com) and I-play (www.i-play.com), have similar services.

FREE GAMES

Whoever said the best things in life are free obviously wasn't referring to mobile games. You definitely get what you pay for. A few sites offer mobile games for nothing, but they are of dubious quality. If you fancy getting something for nothing, though, try www.gamejump.com, one of the better free sites out there.

Another cheap option for the brave smartphone user is to install an emulator to recreate the experience of console machines from a bygone age. However, this can be an ambitious task. Online forums are rife with posts of users attempting to run versions of old Spectrum or Commodore 64 games with limited success. Be prepared to get your hands dirty, and be aware that sometimes, when games do work, they often run slowly and the controls can be awkward to use. If you are feeling adventurous with your smartphone, a good place to start is the forums at www.emulator-zone.com.

GETTING MORE POWER

The mobile game market is big now, but it is about to get even bigger.

The ambition of the developers and the quality of the games is constantly

improving. As phones become more powerful, mobile games may eventually approach the quality of dedicated handheld gaming devices.

It won't be long before we start to see games that interact with products in the real world, or motion-sensitive handsets that link up to a TV for Wii-style gaming. This really will give the likes of Nintendo and Sony something to worry about. **CS**



► Games can be downloaded from a number of different sites

HOW TO... Download a game to a mobile phone

1 Access your network's portal. Open your phone's web browser by holding down the '0' key – most Nokia handsets have an italicised 'i' logo on this button, symbolising the internet. Scroll down to the Games Arcade listing and click on the icon.

2 You will be presented with a full menu containing a list of categories and links to games. Scroll around the various sub-

categories to find the game you wish to download and click on its name. A page listing the game will appear, along with a screenshot, a brief description of the game, the price and the size of the file to be downloaded. If you are happy to go ahead with the purchase, click on Buy It.

3 You will be asked for confirmation of the download, so click Yes. A security

warning may appear at this point, but as you are downloading from a trustworthy source it is safe to continue. You will now be asked whether you would like the game installed on the phone or memory card. It doesn't matter which, so just choose the location with the most free space.

4 The game will begin to download and a bar will run across the bottom of the screen

signifying its process. When it has fully downloaded, you'll be asked if you'd like to start the game straight away. It's best to click No and exit the internet browser first, to save on the operating system's memory and ensure that the game runs at its best. Then start the game by opening the phone's menu and locating it in the My Own folder (on some devices, it will appear in the games or applications folders).

